



LNP 280 How I Almost Lost My Leg Amberly Lago

Pat: Hi, this is Pat Iyer with Legal Nurse Podcast, and today we're going to be speaking with a woman who experienced what I would describe as probably one of the most severe personal injury cases I've encountered. She went through an extended recovery and her story is one that gives you, as a legal nurse consultant, a perspective about what it's like from the patient's point of view to go through a catastrophic injury.

Amberly is the author of a book called *True Grit and Grace: Turning Tragedy into Triumph*. She's a former professional dancer and a fitness trainer. She's become a motivational speaker since her injury, and she shares a passion for inspiring other people. She offers workshops, public events, and she teaches in schools. Amberly Lago has been featured in magazines such as *Shape*, *Fit Pregnancy*, *Health*, *Disability Magazine*, and *AARP*. She is married and lives in southern California with her two daughters.

Amberly, welcome to the show. I'm so glad you could spend some time talking with me today.

Amberly: Thank you, it's really an honor to be here on your show. I appreciate you having me.

Pat: I would love to take you back for the sake of our listeners to that day when your life changed in the blink of an eye. Can you tell our listeners what happened?

Amberly: It's crazy how fast your life can change. I was pretty much living the California dream. I had my dream job. I was so blessed that it didn't feel like a job. I was passionate about my personal training. Fitness was my passion and I was so active. I had the man of my dreams and two healthy kids.



I was on my way home from work on my Harley and I got t-boned by an SUV. I was thrown about 30 feet, and I was sliding down Ventura Blvd. When I came to a stop, I immediately felt pain. I looked down at my leg and it was just like something out of a horror scene. It was crumbled into pieces. It's a good thing that I didn't know at the time that it was my femoral artery that had been severed, but there was blood squirting out with every pulse. I didn't want to let go of my leg for fear of it. In my mind, I thought it might fall off.

It's crazy. The first thing that came to mind was, "Oh no, I might have to train clients on crutches for a while." Little did I know that it would take 34 surgeries, 3 ½ months in the hospital the first time, and I was going to be put into an induced coma. I was lucky to have my leg because I had a one percent chance of saving it. When I woke up from a coma, the first thing I learned was they were going to amputate my leg.

Being a former professional dancer and an athlete, I worked for Nike. I was a run leader. I trained boxers and fitness competitors. My legs were my livelihood, so that was probably one of the worst things that I could've learned. I tell you, it took an act of God and all the strength, and support, of my friends and family, some incredible doctors and nurses that I was able to pull through. I was able to save my leg, but that was actually the easy part.

I know it sounds horrible and sounds like "How could that be the easy part," but after saving my leg and having those 34 surgeries, the hard part was when I found I made it through. They saved my leg, and they diagnosed me with complex regional pain syndrome, which is dubbed the suicide disease because it's ranked highest on the pain scale. Here I thought I made it. I made it through, only to be told I would live the rest of my life in a wheelchair.

I had to really come up with all kinds of tools and strategies to pull out of the darkness that I was in because I hit rock bottom. Just learning how to live in chronic pain, I really had to develop some tools and strategies to strengthen my resilience. That's why I want to share my story because I just found out there's something like two out of five people that live in chronic pain.

We all go through pain, whether it's emotional pain or physical pain, and so it's my hope to inspire others that no matter what their circumstances are, they can find a way to live a life of joy despite their circumstances.

Pat: I appreciate that description of what you went through. You were kind when we met each other at a conference earlier this year to give me a copy of your book. From our listeners' perspective as legal nurse consultants, one of the things I found most striking is that there was a doctor who wanted to amputate your leg right away, and your husband intervened. Tell our listeners what happened and how you ended up avoiding that surgery.

Amberly: When I was in a coma, they said they wanted to amputate. My husband said, "No, I want her to wake up with both of her legs. I want her to make that decision on whether they're going to amputate or not." My husband is a lieutenant commander with the highway patrol, and he has a lot of connections. I'm telling you, it took every connection that he had and a lot of praying.

We had a family friend who was a doctor. He called him and said, "What do I do? I don't know what to do." When I woke up out of the coma and I learned that, I said, "No! No way! I want to keep my leg" and so I was transferred to another hospital. When I was in a coma, my husband had Googled limb salvage and he found a doctor who was a trauma specialist, Dr. Don Wiss. Even though I had a one percent chance of saving my leg, Dr. Wiss was willing to try to save it.

When I was in the hospital at Cedars, Dr. Wiss, I was told was away at a conference. They said, "He won't be in until Monday. He's away at a conference." I was in the hospital on a Sunday night alone and this guy comes in, and he's got on a blazer. He didn't look like a doctor, but he had a nametag on.

I looked at his nametag and it said, "Dr. Don Wiss." I said, "You're the man who's going to save my leg." I just reached out for his hand and grabbed it. I didn't want to let go. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, he's the man who's going to at least try." He said, "We're going to see what we can do. The first thing that we're going to do is go in tomorrow morning and we're just going to kind of clean up everything."

I had a fixator on my leg, and I had all these metal bars that were basically holding my leg together. My femoral artery had been repaired, and they were checking every day. I guess there's a matter of time because you only have so much time. The tissue on my leg was already dying, so there's only a matter of time before the bone starts to die if you don't do something to try to put it back together. I was so touched that here he was. He came in on his day off on a Sunday to come see me, and to this day I have such an incredible relationship with him. He's in my book, and I'm actually in one of his books.

He didn't give up on me. He knew how much I wanted to keep my leg, but he's not also just responsible for saving my leg. He had a huge impact in my recovery journey because after he had saved my leg, I was so scarred that I hated my leg. I hated that I was scarred. I hated that it gave me so much pain. It wasn't until I went to see Dr. Wiss and sat in his office, where he put my leg in his lap and he looked at it like a piece of art, that I was able to think, "Wow, if he can look at my leg like it's a piece of art, so can I."

I started to love my leg a little more each day. I found that if we can start to have that self-acceptance and that self-love, it can grow. It really was the beginning. That was the beginning of my recovery journey, just kind of accepting where I was and accepting what I can do, where and what I could do.

That was truly the beginning of my recovery journey. That was when I started to accept my scars and be able to not have to cover them up all the time. I feel like when you can really accept any imperfections you may have... Look, people are going to judge you either way. They're either going to love you for it or hate you for it. Either way, you'll be more comfortable in your own skin. I just want to be comfortable in my own skin and he's helped me to do that.

Pat: Tell us what it was like. You were in the hospital for 3 ½ months. Some of the people listening to this podcast are taking care of patients in clinical settings. Some of them are not working clinically and are encountering patients through medical records. Their job is to summarize the medical records and help the attorneys who are

handling the cases, such as yours, trying to make sense of what the experience was like.

I can imagine that you must have had a phenomenal amount of pain during that initial hospitalization. Was it effectively controlled? Tell us about that whole experience.

The expert fact witness summarizes medical records of people who have suffered catastrophic injuries. I completed over 500 expert fact witness reports. I am offering a free online training about this challenging and rewarding role. Join me by watching our free online training, *The Role of the Expert Fact Witness: How You and Your Client Benefit*. Go to the show notes at podcast.legalnursepodcast.com for a button to click so you can register for this program.

Amberly: No, it was really hard to control my pain. In fact, after one of my surgeries, they had to go in and do a muscle flap. They had to take half my calf because there was such a big hole in my lower leg. They had to take half of my calf and do a skin graft and take the skin from the top of my leg and put it down on the bottom of my leg. My pain was so high that I was going into shock. My vitals were slowly falling, and they thought they were going to have to induce me into a coma again.

My pain has been off the charts. Even when I got out of the hospital, my pain was so bad that I thought that this was just kind of part of it, this is what it's like, but I have to tell you I had the most incredible group of doctors who were my pain doctors in the hospital. They were so loving and kind. I think that when somebody who is looking after you just stops to listen, it makes such a difference. Sometimes that's all you really need when you're in so much pain is just for someone to listen just to feel like you're being heard.

In my case, you could see it obviously looked like I had a lot of pain, but there are so many people out there, especially with CRPS, that you can't necessarily see their pain. Pain demands to be heard, so I was trying to ignore it and stuff it down. Man, it demands to be heard, and it was telling me in every way, "You need to pay attention to this." It sends your body into like fight or flight. Through the support of these amazing nurses that I had, (many of whom I still am in touch with,



and we're friends to this day), and the support of my family, I think the only thing worse than my pain is knowing that my pain is causing someone that I love pain.

When you're going through a traumatic injury like I've had, it doesn't just affect you. It affects your whole family, the whole family unit. It has affected my relationship with my husband, my daughters, and my friends, but it is up to me in how I react to what has happened and making the best of that situation. I definitely have had some incredible nurses and I have to say, I've had some situations where I'll never forget.

I had a lady who was a nurse who came over. She was reviewing my case and basically, she had to look at my leg and decide on worst-case scenario. "We're going to give you what you will need for future care if they amputate your leg versus what you will need for future care if you keep your leg." They had to add in everything from what a prosthetic would cost, and this is after I've had all these surgeries, and I'm out of the hospital.

She looked at my leg and at the time, I had two compression socks on it because it would swell up so big. She looked at my leg and the first thing she said is, "Are you going to keep it?" I said, "What do you mean am I going to keep it? I kept it. What kind of question is that?"

Looking back, I can see it looked pretty bad, but I was in survival mode. I was doing the best I could every single day just to survive the pain and get up. I had a hospital bed when I got home in the middle of my living room. There were days I thought, "How am I going to get through this?" I would just hear my daughter's little voice saying, "Momma," and that's all I needed to get me going.

It makes such a difference when you have a caretaker who shows you kindness and doesn't treat you just like I felt, like a piece of meat. "Are you going to keep it?" It's my leg, and, of course, I'm going to keep it. I want to keep it.

Now it gave me a little more understanding later. About a year after my accident, I was doing physical therapy every day. I had gone through these surgeries, and I had tried everything for pain, Eastern and Western



medicine. I had a spinal stimulator. I had ketamine infusions, spinal radiofrequencies, and spinal blocks. I was taking 73 homeopathic pills on top of Western and Eastern medicine. You name it, I had tried it. I'm telling you if somebody said, "Hey, I've got this snake spit that will cure your pain." I would say, "Snake spit! Okay, well, I'll try that."

I was in a place of desperation. Finally, when I realized this is the rest of my life, and I'm going to have to live in this pain, I went to my pain doctor and said, "Can you just cut it off?" I said, "I can't take the pain any longer. I need you to amputate my leg." He said, "We can't do that." I said, "What do you mean you can't do it? You need to cut it off. I can't live like this."

He said, "You've got this nerve disease. CRPS, you have it. There's no known cure. There are only treatments. If we cut your leg off, you're still going to have CRPS, and you're still going to have the pain." That's when I hit rock bottom. That's when I thought, "Oh my God, this is the rest of my life. I'm going to have to live like this the rest of my life."

I was in a really dark place. Sometimes when we think we've hit rock bottom, we hit another bottom. I think I needed to hit that in order for me to say, "Oh, my gosh." My life was spiraling downwards so quickly that I thought I needed to do something to get out of this, and that's when I started developing the tools to climb out of this.

I had a friend who said, "You obviously have something instilled in you that allows you to thrive because other people in your situation, they're still in a wheelchair, or they're still taking a million pills a day, living in a dark room, and they're giving up on life. What is it in you that's so instilled in you that allows you to thrive?"

That's when I really thought about it. I came up with an acronym and developed a workbook to help others. It inspired me to write my second book because I think one of the questions I get asked most often is,

- "How do I live in pain?"
- "How do I work out in pain?"
- "How do I still find joy despite pain?"



- “How do I walk?”
- “How do I walk when I was told I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life, that I would wear orthopedic shoes the rest of my life, that I would never have a normal life?”
- “How do I do it?”

That is what has inspired me to share that with others because no one should have to live like that, no one should have to live in a place of darkness. We all have that light within us, and we all have that resilience within us. It's just finding the ways to strengthen our resilience every single day.

It's not easy, and I'm not sitting here saying it is. It's hard. It's hard work. It's waking up every day and deciding, and making that choice that I want to thrive, I want to be resilient, I'm not going to be in that place of victimhood, that's not what I want to show my daughters. I want them to grow up with an example of someone who is not just a survivor. I don't want to be known as just a survivor. I want to be known as someone who had this happen to me, that's part of my story, but it's not what has happened to me. It's what I do with what's left.

Pat: I know that our listeners will immediately think of patients who've laid down and accepted their fate and have not fought back. They will also think of patients who have taken the perspective that you're describing, of discovering how they can overcome the adversity and maintain a hopeful perspective.

Amberly: I think once we choose hope anything is possible. I think the important thing to remember is we have a choice. Once you realize you have choice, that empowers you.

First of all, from the perspective of the legal nurse consultant, what happened with your lawsuit? That's their perspective. They assist attorneys in summarizing records and developing strategies. They know what the insurance companies will and will not do in terms of settlement. What occurred legally with the man who hit you?

Amberly: I've never spoken to the man who hit me since then. He worked for the Ford dealership. He was in a hurry to deliver a brand-new SUV to someone when he gunned it out of the parking lot and hit me. I



wouldn't have even thought about having a lawsuit. Thank goodness my husband is the one who acted on that. We have a very close family friend. We spend every Christmas with them, and they were able to guide us. He was my lawyer and he did an amazing job.

We had to prove that this wasn't just some side job for me, this was my career. I had done a fitness video the day before my accident. I was a trainer who had three trainers who worked for me. I was out of work for a year and a half. What helped my case was that I'm very anal when it comes to keeping track of all my records. I had every check, the check number, the date, who it was from, and how many sessions it was for. I had the number of sessions I trained every week or every day, how many sessions I had trained for the week, month, and year.

I was able to hand that over, and they had a forensic attorney who went through detail-for-detail every single day of my life for the previous years. I had one week in my calendar that I didn't have a record of, and it was a week of Christmas. They said, "Oh, but you don't have a record here" and I was like, "That was Christmas. I took that week off."

I think for my case it was because I was a business owner, and I was able to show what my income was. I was the breadwinner of the family. My husband is a cop. He just recently retired, so he's got a good pension, but unfortunately, they don't make a ton of money. I was working six, seven days a week and was the breadwinner. I had to prove how much money I lost by not working for a year and a half.

I can't train 12 clients a day like I used to. This has led me down a different path where now I can impact people, not just on a one-on-one basis like I did before. I'm doing the speaking and I'm reaching out to larger audiences, but I couldn't train.

They had to prove in my case that because of my injuries, and because I would be in and out of the hospital with surgeries, that I wouldn't be able to return to my career as a trainer like I should. At first that was devastating to me. It was heartbreaking because I thought, "I will be able to do that." Well, I tried, and I wasn't able to do that. Thank God I had a good attorney who could take some of the emotion out of it, and he could handle the legal part of it for me because I was a



disaster. I was an emotional basket case, and I was in denial of what my future really held.

We settled the case fairly quickly. I think it was less than a year after my accident that my that case was settled. It was such a black-and-white case. They had come at me from every angle trying to say that my motorcycle was faulty, or I was a reckless driver, or I was in camouflage, and they couldn't see me. When you crash a motorcycle, the speedometer gets stuck on whatever speed you were going. I was going approximately 20 miles an hour. I had on a bright, hot pink jacket. They were able to see me, so they in my case proved it to be 100 percent at fault on their side.

Pat: You talked earlier before I asked you the question about your lawsuit about the techniques that you've developed to help you get through the pain to find joy in living. What can you share with our listeners that has been most effective in helping you through this very difficult recovery into your current state of having some chronic pain?

Amberly: I think it's all about mindset. For myself, I developed a daily gratitude practice. I have people say, "How can you be grateful when you're in pain?" or "How are you grateful when you were in a hospital bed?" and there's always something to be grateful for. For me, even when I was in the hospital bed, I was grateful that I had a view in the hospital room, that I had friends that would come to see me. I was grateful that I was still alive.

In fact, every day my daughter and I, when I put her to bed at night, we talk, and we have cuddle time with my little dog. Having that cuddle time is important and I say, "What was the best thing that happened in your day?" and I say, "What is one thing that you're grateful for?" Sometimes it's often really silly what she's grateful for, but at least it's instilling that in her to be grateful because when you're grateful, to me, it's alchemy.

It was transformational in my recovery journey. I went from feeling hopeless, depressed and sometimes angry, and often just really sad. It took all of that and it changed it to being hopeful, to being empowered, to being motivated to have more in life, to find joy. I think too what has helped me is being of service. Even when I was in the hospital, I needed to



have purpose because when you have purpose, it gives you a reason to keep moving forward every day.

Even though I was stuck in that hospital bed, I was still reaching out to my clients, making sure that they had their exercise routines in place or that they had another trainer who was working with them. I was even talking to the nurses giving them exercise tips in the hospital room, and so they invited me back. They wanted me to teach a workout for them when I got well enough to do it.

I think it's having a community for me when I reached out and I admitted that, "I put a smile on my face, but this is what's going on. I carry these scars that remind me of what I have been through, survived and came out of, but I go through hard times, and I deal with pain." Once I did that, social media has been an amazing platform and a source of connection with others who also live with pain, whether it's physical pain that you can see or emotional pain that they've been through. It's allowed me to connect with others. By building our community of people and people that can resonate with your story, they can say, "Oh my gosh, me too. I go through that," it strengthens your resilience.

Those have been really helpful. I think we just have to start where we are, use what we have, do what we can, make the best of every day, and commit to being the best version of our self every day.

Pat: I appreciate you going through this experience. I know that every time you talk about you, it dredges up memory and sensation. I admire you for being able to do that, to share that message of hope.

Amberly: Thank you.

Pat: Tell our listeners the titles of your books and how they can find out more about you, and get copies of your books or anything else that you can offer them?

Amberly: I would love to connect with people. Reach out to me. You can contact me directly through www.amberlylago.com. You can also get my book *True Grit and Grace: Turning Tragedy into Triumph* there or on Amazon. Look for me on social media because I post a little dose of inspiration every day on Instagram at

@amberlylagomotivation and Twitter @amberlylago and Facebook @amberlylagospeaker.

I can't stress enough how important gratitude is and how journaling has been a really helpful tool for me. I have created a downloadable gratitude journal, and so I can send you the link for that. You can put it in your show notes if you like or if you go on my website at www.amberlylago.com. You can sign up and get your free gratitude journal there, as well.

Pat: I'm particularly struck by the gratitude journal because I'm working with a coach now who recommends that every day you write down what you're grateful for. I started Monday of this week and every day I've got something different, a list of things that I reflect on and say, "Yes, these are the things that happened to me today, these are the things that I'm grateful for."

Amberly: I love that.

Pat: To have a positive focus is so essential in keeping your spirits up.

Amberly: Yes, it sure is. It just shapes your whole day.

Pat: Thank you, Amberly, for being on the show and thank you to our listeners for listening to this interview. Be sure to tell other legal nurse consultants about Legal Nurse Podcast and stay tuned for a new show next week. Thanks so much.

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